ZOOARCHAEOLOGY ON THE INTERNET
A VIEW FROM BRITAIN

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The Internet is becoming an ever more readily accepted part of our professional lives. As zooarchaeologists, we are fortunate now to be able to freely access a range of data repositories, to join social networks and mailing lists to share information with our colleagues, and to have opportunities to comment more or less informally on our research and that of others through blogs. This paper has two main aims, firstly to evaluate how zooarchaeologists in Britain are engaging with the Internet in their professional lives, and secondly to suggest some future directions for digital zooarchaeology.

The obvious benefit the Internet offers is that it is a great medium for communication. The advantages of putting research and datasets online include easier accessibility, especially for workers outside of academia or in institutions with limited journal subscriptions, as well as improving the visibility and impact of the work. The citation advantage of open access research has been explored in some detail, summarized neatly by Swan (2010), and despite what skeptics say, putting your research online does increase the chances of it being cited. This doesn’t necessarily mean using Open Access journals (so-called “gold OA”); it can also mean self-archiving publications either on an institutional profile page, or using a service such as academia.edu, a state of affairs known as “green” OA (Harnad et al. 2004). Zooarchaeologists are fortunate to have the Zoonbook social network (http://zooarchaeology.ning.com), initiated by James Morris, which provides a system for sharing papers with other workers through a third-party host (see Morris [2009] for details).

Blogging archaeological research may help the researcher, not just in raising their profile or the profile of their research, but also by providing an immediate form of output that is widely recognized as personal, informal, experimental, and open to discussion through the comments area below the blog post. Price (2010) provides a review of three different approaches to blogging, emphasizing that the “best academic blogs are multivoiced, drawing either on multiple writers or on the multiple voices of the feedback they generate” (Price 2010:140).

In zooarchaeology, little has been made thus far of the other great advantage of the Internet, the ability to explore data and interpretations in a way that is, in the words of Andrew Sherratt (1993:194), both “post-textual” and “fun.” It may be the case that this stems from an ideological distance between zooarchaeologists and the rather more post-processual archaeologists who have tried this kind of work, notably Ruth Tringham (e.g., Tringham 2004). An increasing number of more post-processual research concerns among zooarchaeologists, evidenced by recent books like the late John Evans’s Environmental Archaeology and the Social Order (2003), and James Morris and Mark Maltby’s Integrating Social and Environmental Archaeologies (2010), gives hope that the situation may soon change, however.

The Survey

In April 2010, I carried out a survey of British zooarchaeologists (defined in the loosest possible terms as either zooarchaeologists who are based in Britain or those who work on British material). The intention of the survey was to assess how British zooarchaeologists are currently using the Internet, and what their attitudes to it may be. The survey was advertised by e-mail among colleagues, on my blog (http://matthewlaw.wordpress.com), on the ZOOARCH mailing list (www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/zooarch.html), and on the Zoonbook social network. 33 complete responses were received.

The respondents were overwhelmingly zooarchaeologists who are interested in vertebrate remains, although a good proportion was also interested in mollusks (Table 1). This isn’t any surprise given the emphasis on vertebrate remains among the members of the ZOOARCH list and on Zoonbook.

As Table 2 shows, there was a fair balance of research staff and students among the respondents, but also a similar
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number of freelancers, a sign that some at least are gladly seizing the opportunities that online communities offer to those traditionally excluded from access to academic journals in terms of broadening access to zooarchaeological research and datasets.

All of the respondents were members of the ZOOARCH list. Membership of Bonecommons (http://www.alexandria-archive.org/bonecommons) and Zoobook was very popular among those surveyed as well. Individual respondents also added the ISOGEOCHEM mailing list (http://list.uvm.edu/archives/isogoechem.html), the BoneTools mailing list (http://www.wbrg.net/), and the online forum at http://www.archeozoofr to the list of online communities they had joined (Table 3).

Unsurprisingly, as Table 4 shows, all the respondents use e-mail to talk and collaborate with their colleagues. Perhaps more surprisingly, use of other online collaboration tools is not so common. The two other services that respondents mentioned were Huddle, online document management software (http://www.huddle.com), and the voice over Internet telephone software Skype.

Table 5 reveals that most people use the groups they have joined to find research articles, and the facility on Zoobook to upload and share hard-to-find papers is of particular note here (Morris 2009).

Online metric databases are fairly well used, which is encouraging for those who take the time to make this information available; however, the majority of respondents have not contributed to any databases (Tables 6 and 7). Other databases mentioned by respondents were the Paleobiology Database (http://paleodb.org/), the Environmental Archaeology Database of the Archaeology Data Service (http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/eab_eh_2004/), and the Bugs Coleopteran Ecology Package (http://www.bugsee.com/). As Table 8 shows, all of those who responded agreed that online initiatives make their work easier.

A substantial minority have blogs of their own, and a slight majority have online profiles at their institutions (Tables 9 and 10). The majority of respondents believe that the Internet is helping them to raise their professional profile, although almost a third are uncertain (Table 11). Most of those surveyed have not established research collaborations with people they met online (Table 12).

A sizeable majority think it’s important to make primary datasets freely available; however, opinions were more mixed about blogging research (Tables 13 and 14). Many of the comments given in association with the question of blogging suggested that time was the key issue keeping people from starting a blog, although one respondent added that they do not themselves read any blogs, and wouldn’t expect anybody to read theirs.

Table 15 shows that, even with the increase in electronic publication options, print is still highly valued. Almost three quarters of respondents feel that a book is a more prestigious form of publication than an open access publication, although one person was at pains to explain that they felt that this was how their peers viewed the situation, rather than their own view. Despite that, a very sizeable majority said that they would publish conference proceedings online as an open access publication if the process was sufficiently straightforward (Table 16).

Overall, a picture emerges of a profession that is open to the possibilities the Internet offers their own research, but which is wary of investing time in online projects that will receive little recognition from funding bodies and tenure.
committees. One respondent commented that although they had answered predominantly in the negative with respect to their own online presence, they intended to change that situation soon.

Where Next?

So what now for digital zooarchaeology? I would like to see more datasets online. The survey reveals that as a group, we consume more than we contribute (of course, that’s probably true of traditional printed output too), but sharing data not only makes research easier, but in doing so increases the breadth and quality of comparisons within the research. For this to work in the best possible way, standards for presenting the huge range of data that comes out of zooarchaeological research need to be established. The International Council for Archaeozoology [ICAZ] doesn’t currently have a working group for digital data standards; perhaps it should.

Somewhat against the spirit of web democracy, I think that in order to improve the acceptability of online publication, and to maintain its visibility against the noise of the World Wide Web, zooarchaeological data needs to be published in as few repositories as possible, and critical to making the right choice of which ones to support is the issue of sustainability. There is little point building an awesome library of archaeological data that is free only for all that information to disappear if the funding runs out. Too many websites have been established and filled with useful information only to be abandoned or worse taken offline. A key problem here is reliance on free third-party service providers: flickr and YouTube may make communicating research easier, but there is no guarantee of permanence or stability, as demonstrated by the closure in 2009 of Geocities, or the social network platform Ning’s decision in 2010 to no longer offer free hosting. Happily, some initiatives like OpenContext (http://www.opencontext.org) are being archived by schemes designed to prevent just that, and which provide stable addresses that can be used as references offline in print.

Attitudes to Open Access publication can be expected to change. In the case of some types of publication, and especially those like this volume which are very much concerned with changing technology and current situations, the faster publication timetable OA offers make it the most suitable route. Open Access does not entail a lowering of academic standards either, as OA publications may still be (and often are) peer-reviewed. Nor does publication have to be a straight choice between Open Access and traditional print: print on demand publications could be produced to complement online publications, similar to the system offered by the
British Library for doctoral theses that are already digitized in the EThOS (Electronic Theses Online—http://ethos.bl.uk/) scheme.

Data doesn’t have to end with tables and the interpretative publication. I would love to see more imaginative use of zooarchaeological results, employing the concept of database narrative, where the zooarchaeologist guides users through their data in different thematic ways—presenting the same information with interpretations geared towards taphonomy, economy, ritual or environment, and where opposing interpretations can be voiced and explored.

The complaint we all have, however, is that unless we’re paid specifically to do this, it takes up too much time. Here I suspect the solution lies in normalizing digital archaeology, and in the steady trickle of requirements for an online component in funding applications. Although the survey was limited to zooarchaeologists, the issues presented apply to the wider archaeological community, and many of the problems are common to scholarship in general. The mere fact that this paper was accepted for the ICAZ conference, that there was an entire session on archaeozoology in a digital world, and that the survey received so many considered and positive responses, suggests that there is reason to be hopeful that more and more zooarchaeologists will be taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet.

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